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Evaluation

Evaluation of the second regional cooperation framework for Latin America and the Caribbean, 2001-2007

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I. Introduction

1. The present report evaluates the second regional cooperation framework (RCF) for Latin America and the Caribbean, which covers the period 2001-2005, extended to 2007. The objectives were to assess development results, highlighting key results of outputs and outcomes, lessons learned and good practices, as well as the performance of the RCF in the areas of knowledge generation and sharing, policy advice, and programme support. The evaluation also measured how the RCF contributed to establishing the UNDP comparative advantage as an advisor for sustainable human development and as a knowledge-based organization in the region. Finally, the evaluation identifies innovative approaches being used within the RCF programmed project portfolio in the region.

2. The framework used to evaluate the RCF consists of five interrelated sets of questions that measured the relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, cost effectiveness and sustainability of each RCF programme area. To apply the framework, evaluators conducted interviews with UNDP officials; officials of multilateral institutions; members of private and public organizations in a select number of countries that have interacted with regional projects; policymakers; and independent academics from Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe and the United States.

3. In conjunction with the Regional Bureau for Latin America and the Caribbean, the Evaluation Office organized cluster workshops in all areas of intervention with the participation of an important number of resident representatives and regional programme advisors and government representatives, including current and former ministers from a number of Central and South American countries. The meetings were held in Santiago de Chile, Bogotá, Colombia, Panama, and Trinidad and Tobago, with representatives from most of the countries in which the regional programme had activities. In addition, site visits were organized to Barbados, Chile, Colombia, Guyana, Honduras, Panama and Trinidad and Tobago.

II. Main findings

A. Effectiveness: What was achieved?

4. The second RCF was effective in four critical areas where the UNDP placed great emphasis. Most noteworthy is the contribution made by RCF programmes to a better understanding of democracy and its challenge of delivering results for the poor. This is a specific goal of the democratic governance areas and represents a major accomplishment that affects all other areas of intervention. The regional programme in democratic governance took twenty years of low-profile but significant academic work and placed the resulting important findings in the centre of contemporary policy debates. As a result, UNDP is now firmly positioned as a state-of-the-art institution on how to make incipient democracies more responsive to the poor in Latin America and the Caribbean.

5. A second area of impact concerns poverty reduction strategies. The RCF programmes have led to a better understanding of poverty reduction strategies by developing measurements and costing out the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

6. Third, the RCF was effective in achieving an improved use of the concept of human development. In this sense, RCF programmes contributed to a better understanding of the changing needs of the region, especially as the need to address increasing inequalities becomes the key challenge facing democratic rule.

7. The fourth area of effectiveness concerns knowledge generation and sharing. Overall, the RCF was effective in generating and sharing knowledge across the areas of intervention. This was a key goal of the RCF, and the evaluation finds that, overall, the goal was achieved. While the RCF was effective in this area, the main concern was the quality of the products and the dissemination strategies that were employed. Written products are of variable quality – the principal critique is that they are perceived largely as books and not as part of a broader ongoing and sustainable process.

8. Policy advice had mixed results and was seldom effective. In some areas, such as poverty alleviation linked to MDGs, the impact appears to be important. In democratic governance some programmes have had an important impact on contemporary political debates. Less success can be claimed in the energy and climate change area. Cross-cutting issues such as gender also have a mixed record. Clearly, human development has been an important reference point, especially as governments read the *Human Development Report*.

9. Capacity development was not effective although the impact of the programmes varied. Some programmes, such as the Information and Management for Governability System (SIGOB), were generally deemed to provide good capacity building programmes. Other training programs remain untested, especially incipient Web-based initiatives. In future, the organization could have a significant role in capacity-building. Frameworks such as human development and citizens' democracy can be linked to an effective training strategy.

B. Efficiency: Is this the best way to achieve the objectives?

10. The RCF established ambitious goals and had limited resources to achieve them. While those goals are laudable and ambition should continue to be a characteristic of RCFs, goals should aim to be consistent with the availability of resources. For example, despite the objective of the RCF to provide significant programme support, funding was sporadic. In the end this was a key issue affecting the efficiency of the second RCF.

11. In an environment of limited resources, more problematic than ambition was the fact that the RCF portfolio was spread too thinly in an attempt to cover demand that exceeded the capacity of the institution to deliver. One way to address this issue may be to limit the number of initiatives by focusing on those areas where the UNDP has already developed core expertise.

12. UNDP achieved efficiency by forging partnerships that allowed it to leverage external resources to finance regional initiatives. At the same time, regional initiatives made good use of scarce resources, especially in areas where the greatest impact was felt.

13. The efficiency of programmes was severely affected by the lack of coordination of country offices with each other and with the Regional Bureau. They often encountered a conflicting structural relationship not only with country offices, but also with other multilateral organizations and development organizations, as each sought to attain financial sustainability.

14. Efficiency was also affected by poor coordination with other United Nations organizations. The single notable exception was the apparently excellent level of cooperation and coordination achieved with the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean.

C. Cost effectiveness: Is the relationship between costs and results reasonable?

15. RBLAC was very forthcoming with financial data, although confusion existed between the number of funded programmes that were actually in place and those that had been streamlined. Thus, poor monitoring and reporting systems did not provide sufficient data to make it possible to assess this criterion.

16. A general observation about the RCF suggests that, overall, a reasonable relationship exists between costs and results; however, the evaluators lacked evaluative evidence to substantiate that conclusion. With better monitoring and reporting it would have been possible to demonstrate conclusively that the programmes implemented achieved satisfactory results because the level of resources was adequate.

17. While the RCF programmes were able to generate significant amounts of funding from other multilateral organizations, it is also the case that a very low level of ownership of regional initiatives is present. The only notable exception is the Caribbean region, where local commitment to programme activities, the attainment of results and the methods chosen to achieve them was demonstrated. While it is the case that the programme identified and made use of local areas of competitive advantage, the evaluators concluded that the critical shortcoming of the second RCF was the rather low level of synergy and complementarity between national and regional UNDP programmes.

D. Relevance: How do the results achieved relate to specified UNDP programme goals and to broader national strategies in the region?

18. The second RCF demonstrates extreme relevance of the issues selected as part of the regional programme. The programme is to be commended for making sense of the conditions, needs and major problems affecting the region and translating this understanding into a series of concrete initiatives. The RCF programmes were also very relevant to specific country priorities, where broad issues affecting the region became more concrete and manageable. At the same time, the RCF was clearly relevant to regional priorities such as how to deepen democracy while simultaneously improving citizen involvement and reducing inequalities.

19. The strategic focus of the RCF programme was supportive of MDG priorities, especially in the poverty reduction area. The identification of key stakeholders was achieved in great measure, although it was less clear how they actually participated in defining programme priorities. As a general observation, the process achieved stakeholder involvement only marginally.

20. Several important efforts were made to coordinate with other development initiatives. This relationship was noteworthy with other multilaterals, especially European efforts to become more engaged in Latin American and the Caribbean. Attempts to coordinate with other organizations were less successful.

21. One of the most significant contributions of the RCF was its ability to engage with decision-makers in the region in a dialogue of the key development issues of the day. That engagement was more clearly visible in the democratic governance area but was present in nearly all areas. It should be noted that engagement in this dialogue was important, although the impact on eventual policy decisions is difficult to gauge.

E. Sustainability: Were the benefits of RCF interventions sustainable?

22. The sustainability of RCF programmes is the area of greatest concern. Overall, the RCF attempted to promote local and regional ownership, but the results have not been as great as expected. Local country partners and beneficiaries did not participate fully in the design, implementation, and monitoring of the programme. Local stakeholders did not really have a sense of ownership of regional programmes, and they still expect UNDP to carry the full burden of all initiatives.

23. This particular problem is largely the result of the absence of clear exit strategies in the design phase of the RCF. Many projects got under way with no clear process in place to monitor impact once UNDP participation ended. Funding of projects is an important dimension of such a strategy. Without UNDP core funding, and with a very significant dependence on third-party contributions, the long term success of any project will always

be compromised. It is clear that national contributions to RCF programmes have made some sustainable, such as the SIGOB experience. That project, however, is the exception. Most others depend on the availability of third-party funding and, as such, face a precarious long term situation.

24. The evaluation concludes that the most of the projects under the RCF are not replicable. Little evidence exists of follow-up activities, except for those where the UNDP has developed the expertise. This speaks to the need to focus future RCFs, reduce programme dispersion, institutionalize relationships with national and regional partners, and continue to develop specific niches where long-term commitments can be sustained.

III. Conclusions

25. The second RCF for Latin America and the Caribbean is a major regional initiative that deserves high praise for the complexity of the numerous programmes that were developed during the 2001-2006 period. Most programmes reveal a degree of complexity and sophistication that demonstrates the grasp of the major development challenges that face this vast and complicated region.

26. The complexity of the programmes speaks well for the sophistication of the programme designers. At the same time, that programmatic complexity led to a rather difficult implementation pattern. The implementation difficulties ranged from insufficient coordination to questions about the long-term sustainability of programmes.

27. In comparison to previous regional programmes, and despite the complexity of programme design, the UNDP made significant progress in achieving the objectives established in the design phase. This is particularly important given the dynamic characteristics of the region that, in some measure, made it difficult to achieve programme goals. Achieving objectives speaks well of complex programmes that were sufficiently adaptable to changing regional circumstances.

28. The RCF has been successful in mobilizing third-party resources to regional initiatives. This particular achievement is noteworthy, as it reveals that other organizations recognize the value of UNDP efforts. At the same time, however, this particular achievement is also a challenge, since many programs face funding problems when grant terms expire. Moreover, it is significant that RCF programmes have not received sufficient core resources or support from UNDP, rendering them unsustainable over the long term.

29. Along the same lines, this evaluation concludes that successful and keystone projects could be institutionalized. Successful programmes, not surprisingly, are also those where UNDP has developed expertise and where significant resources have been invested. Those programmes, however, are also those that command a large share of short- or midterm third-party resources. Core UNDP funding should be devoted to institutionalizing keystone projects.

30. A large 'grey zone' of coordination between regional programme initiatives and national projects at the country level has hampered the ability of all initiatives to produce more significant results. That lack of coordination hampers the effectiveness, efficiency, cost efficiency, relevance and sustainability of regional initiatives. A major step toward the successful implementation of regional programmes would be the development and implementation of effective coordination instruments and mechanisms.

IV. Lessons learned

31. The experience of the RCF during the period under evaluation points up several lessons that can be drawn from the experience that might enhance the implementation of regional programmes aimed at addressing regional development challenges. Some of those lessons are discussed below.

32. The most obvious lesson is that the UNDP has been most effective in areas where its expertise was demonstrable, such as democratic governance and human development.

33. In those areas where UNDP expertise is either incipient or lagging, the evaluation results are mixed. The efforts are commendable and in some cases even outstanding, yet overall it is evident that UNDP efforts are complementary to those of other organizations that have developed their key competence in areas such as poverty reduction, climate change and sustainable energy.

34. One area of particular focus should be cross-cutting issues such as gender, which could be considerably strengthened and streamlined. The concern is that more than lip service needs to be provided to these areas, and serious efforts need to be made to mainstream these key issues.

35. In all areas arrangements with regional institutions could be significantly strengthened and institutionalized. The regional programme indeed developed significant ties with these institutions, but they lack continuity. UNDP could play a very positive role by developing strategic long-term institutional and programmatic arrangements.

36. While improving coordination between regional and national programmes should be a significant goal, this evaluation also concludes that country and regional ownership has proven effective when outputs and outcomes have been clarified through regional interventions such as that of the Organization for Development in Latin America (PRODDAL) and subsequent initiatives and projects.

V. Recommendations

37. The following recommendations are derived from the evaluation framework.

(a) Keep the knowledge-generation effort applied to policy advice, integrating the concept of human development to other practice areas as a guiding framework. Knowledge generation is a very significant goal of UNDP, and policy relevance of all programmes is important to the countries in the region. As each area-specific evaluation notes, integration of the human development framework to other areas will significantly augment the position of UNDP as an important player in the development world.

(b) Concentrate and limit the regional initiatives to areas of expertise. This recommendation is very clear. To date, the RCF has been characterized by great dispersion of projects and little focus. At the same time, areas exist where UNDP has demonstrated expertise. Given the scarcity of resources, it makes sense to attempt to narrow UNDP engagement to those areas.

(c) Enhance management of projects and programmes with clear monitoring and evaluation structures and mechanisms with a results-based management approach. The main critique of this evaluation has been the absence of monitoring mechanisms and evaluation structures.

(d) Enhance coordination with global and national levels of UNDP, particularly with country offices. Each area examined in this evaluation noted the recurrent problems of

coordination between the three levels. It is clear that this must be an overarching goal of all future RCFs.

(e) Increase collaboration and coordination with regional institutions and with other United Nations organizations regionally. This evaluation notes that the second RCF was able to promote and develop significant relationships with other regional institutions. Yet it was also the case that these relationships are incipient and require significant work to make them effective. A similar situation exists internally, where the potential for collaboration and coordination with other United Nations organizations is enormous.

(f) Structure the projects and initiatives of the new RCF around the achievement of the MDGs. This recommendation is self-evident, given the overwhelming focus of the United Nations system as a whole on the achievement of those goals. The suggestion, more specifically, is that this objective ought to become transversal to all thematic areas.

(g) Enhance national and regional ownership through broader consultation processes and follow-up mechanisms. This evaluation concluded that national and regional ownership of the majority of RCF projects was weak. Consequently, consultations processes need to be strengthened, and participatory follow-up mechanisms need to be developed.

(h) Given the diversification of interests within the region, a subregional approach is recommended. In several of the thematic areas, it is evident that a broad regional approach often misses subregional nuances. The next RCF should seriously consider an approach that can differentiate sufficiently to avoid the trap of generalizing efforts while missing specific targets of opportunity.